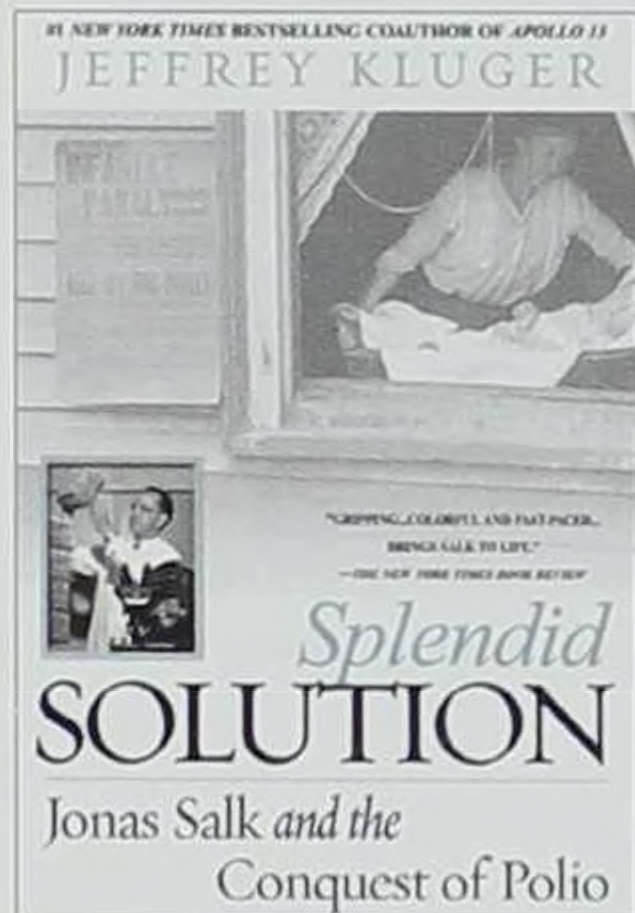


Reading the Past

ON HANDS AND KNEES, her parents looked through a dirty basement window of Blank Memorial Hospital in Des Moines. They could see her lying in bed in the makeshift polio ward. So many children fell ill during those deadly summer months of the early 1950s that Blank set up beds in the basement. No visitors were allowed, parents included. They could not talk to her or even let her know they were there. But they could watch as she cried. The woolen hot packs applied to make her knotted muscles relax had blistered her legs.



Jeffrey Kluger, *Splendid Solution: Jonas Salk and the Conquest of Polio* (New York: Putnam's Sons, 2004), 384 pp. \$25.95 cloth, \$15.00 paper.

Fifty years later, those same parents sat in the Perry Public Library while their daughter shared memories of her fight with polio. There were four other polio survivors present that night along with another dozen local residents. The occasion was part of the annual All Iowa Reads project sponsored by the Iowa Center for the Book and the State Library of Iowa.

Each year, All Iowa Reads selects and promotes one book across the state as a community reading project. This year the book is Jeffrey Kluger's *Splendid Solution: Jonas Salk and the Conquest of Polio*, the

story of the battle to develop a preventative vaccine.

Because many Iowans were part of that story, the project invited individuals with personal stories to attend the discussions whether or not they had read the book. Those stories were so compelling that we did not spend much time on the book itself, but the history at the national level took on new significance when it was reflected in the lives of people in the room.

Kluger is a journalist by trade, a senior writer for *Time Magazine*, and he knows how to tell a story. *Splendid Solution* is the story of Jonas Salk, who became a national hero overnight when his polio vaccine all but eliminated the killer disease in massive field tests in 1954. Kluger weaves many strands of the battle together—Franklin Roosevelt's struggles with polio, the creation of the March of Dimes, and especially the pervasive fear that gripped American families each summer with the onset of the polio season—but it is the life and work of Salk around which the story centers.

That is both good and bad news. On the positive side, Kluger creates a gripping drama. We witness the thrills of successful lab tests as the research team builds its case for a vaccine created from dead virus. Salk's confidence that the body could produce effective antibodies when confronted with a dead polio virus put him at odds with Albert Sabin, who insisted that only

weakened strains of living virus could be effective. Pages fly fast as we await the results of the 1954 field tests. And then the news conference from the University of Michigan campus, with 54,000 doctors listening in on closed-circuit TV: "'In placebo-controlled areas, the poliomyelitis vaccination was 68 percent effective against Type I, 100 percent effective against Type II, and 92 percent effective against Type III.'" Salk's vaccine worked. There was a defense against polio.

On the negative side, Kluger writes history as melodrama. Albert Sabin becomes the villain, abrasive and domineering as he rejects all approaches to the development of any vaccine except his own. Salk quietly endures Sabin's professional attacks because he has confidence in his own approach, but there's no doubt whose side Kluger is on.

While Kluger researched the subject thoroughly, he occasionally taints the account to heighten the drama. A good example is his account of a research colloquy sponsored by the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis to compare findings and chart the most promising areas for funding. Citing only the transcripts of the conference as his source, Kluger paints an arrogant portrait of Sabin. He dismissed the findings of one fellow scientist, "regarding the chart with a thin smile." When Salk tried to speak, Sabin cut him off "dismissively." Kluger derives all those connotations from the printed transcripts of the meetings.

The book clearly does not give Sabin his due. Two years after the much-heralded announcements of the effectiveness of Salk's vaccine, the World Health Organization gave Sabin's "weakened virus" approach a trial in countries that had never used Salk's. Eventually the Sabin vaccine gained the upper hand and was the preferred approach for over 40 years. The Sabin vaccine required no shots; it could be administered on a sugar cube and provided broader immunity than Salk's and prevented an immune person from serving as a carrier. Furthermore, the Sabin vaccine produced a lifelong immunity without the need for repeated vaccinations. Kluger gives Sabin little credit for anything but obstructionism.

But to the families who dreaded the disease and the children and adults who were its victims, the story is the development of a way to prevent polio. And the man who first engineered that "splendid solution" was Dr. Jonas Salk. Those who remember that childhood terror will find themselves drawn into Kluger's narrative. *Splendid Solution* is splendid reading.

—by Tom Morain

Tom Morain is director of community relations for Graceland University in Lamoni. Because he had led a discussion of *Splendid Solution* in Perry, Iowa, we asked him to review the book for this column.